

Anglophone Poetry in Colonial India, 1780-1913: A Critical Anthology.

Mary Ellis Gibson. Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2011. 397 pp.
ISBN-13 978-0-8214-1942-7

Indian Angles: English Verse in Colonial India from Jones to Tagore.

Mary Ellis Gibson. Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2011. 334 pp.
ISBN-13 978-0-8214-1941-0

Becoming Imperial Citizens: Indians in the Late-Victorian Empire.

Sukanya Banerjee. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010. 272 pp.
ISBN-978-0-8223-4608-1

The three works reviewed in this essay exemplify the best of interdisciplinary humanities scholarship grounded in literary study. They will largely be treated as two works, rather than three, for my purposes here, as Mary Ellis Gibson's *Anglophone Poetry in Colonial India, 1780-1913: A Critical Anthology*, and *Indian Angles: English Verse in Colonial India from Jones to Tagore*—are essentially extensions of each other. The former, after a long discursive introduction, is an anthology of poems, with bibliographic paratext, from the poets discussed in the latter. Either book can be read independently of the other, depending on the reader's purposes, but each enriches the other. Sukanya Banerjee's *Becoming Imperial Citizens: Indians in the Late-Victorian Empire* is a different type of book, a history of ideas, but it connects to Gibson's works in ways that I will elaborate on below. Aside from their treatment of colonial India, the immediate thing that all three works have in common is a concern to push the limits of nation and citizenship, as it was understood in the colonial era as well as how we may understand it today, in retrospect and for our own times.

In *Anglophone Poetry* Gibson presents the work of thirty nine Anglophone poets in the main part of the book, working chronologically from the late eighteenth century to the early twentieth, and follows with four "comic and satiric poets" in the appendix. Each poet is accorded a bibliographic introduction, the length depending upon how much was known about them, and a sample of two to five poems. *Indian Angles* discusses about half of the poets featured in *Anglophone Poetry* in greater detail, cross-referencing throughout to the pages of the anthology that further examples of the poet's work appear on. *Indian Angles* is divided into three parts consisting of two chapters each. Part I, "Languages, Tropes, and Landscape in the Beginnings of English Language poetry" focuses on "contact poetics" in eighteenth century Calcutta, and the concept of bardic nationalism, borrowed from Katie Trumpener. Poets examined in detail are Sir William Jones, Sir John Horsford, Anna Maria, H.L.V. Derozio and Emma Roberts. Part II, "The Institutions of Colonial Mimesis" moves into the early-mid nineteenth century. It looks at reading, writing and publishing as a profession in colonial India, and on canon formation. Featured poets are David Lester Richardson, Kasiprasad Ghosh, Michael Madhusudan Dutt and Mary Carshore. Part III, "Nationalisms, Religion, and Aestheticism in the Late Nineteenth Century" looks at the linked but sometimes contradictory ideas of cosmopolitanism and nationalism, focusing on the work of Mary E. Leslie, Toru Dutt, Manmohan Ghose, Sarojini Naidu and Rabindranath Tagore.

Gibson writes in the introduction to *Anglophone Poetry* that "[n]ationalist parameters have, to date, shaped most attempts to collect English language writing in India" (2).

Anyone working on India, whether in the colonial or postcolonial periods, knows that language is a highly vexed issue, charged with nationalism of both the jingoistic as well as more positive forms. In an attempt to think about a poetical canon outside of nationalism, to move beyond the common assumption that Indian writing in English is not really possible, that the “authenticity” of the country can only be expressed in one of India’s many native languages, Gibson studies a wide range of poets, both celebrated and relatively unknown, British and Indian born, including Indian poets. On the one hand we have Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941), and on the other Anna Maria (c. 1770–c. 1793), about whom practically nothing is known. There are some poets who were well-known in their day, in India or Britain or both, but who are largely forgotten now by anyone other than serious scholars of poetry or of India. Gibson writes about Sir William Jones (1746–94):

one could say that Jones’ impact on late eighteenth century Europe and on English-speaking India was analogous to, if much greater than, Salman Rushdie’s impact on the novel two hundred years later—and for similar reasons. Within radically different linguistic and literary contexts, each could be said to have reinvented the English vernacular as a contact language for literary purposes (*Indian Angles*, 29).

This is a point of significance that surely all literary scholars—whether their focal area is the colonial era, the novel genre, or contemporary transnational literary flows—should find fascinating, not just scholars of poetry.

Perhaps the relative contemporary obscurity of figures such as Jones today can be attributed to the medium of poetry. It is Gibson’s focus on this genre, primarily, that makes her study more truly original than if it had simply looked at literature on broader terms. Much archival research was required, as there is not the same body of published and re-published collections of Indian poetry, from any era, that there is of novels or other prose works. Her approach is unique, as the anthology is not necessarily a work of *recovery*, as Susie Tharu and K. Lalita’s *Women Writing in India: 600 B.C. to the Early 20th Century* was, for example. But neither is it pure literary criticism, as she combines the best of both approaches. Admirably, she does not only include the “best,” or most aesthetically pleasing, examples in *Anglophone Poetry*. As she writes: “some [poems] are so ugly that they are interesting” (26). Much of the detailed textual analyses of the poems in *Indian Angles*, discussing the rhyming schemes, the metre, the imagery, is very detailed, and while extremely rich and well-integrated into broader discussions of place and time, is perhaps not very accessible to a non-poetry scholar. But, generally, both *Indian Angles* and its accompanying anthology are immensely readable and accessible works of literary criticism.

The form of the criticism, at times, mirrors the form of that being critiqued, in that Gibson discusses how, particularly in the late eighteenth century, collections of poetry were accompanied by extensive paratexts and intertexts. As she writes,

like the blind men seeking to understand the elephant by focusing on its appendages, we can learn at least something from these paratexts that is otherwise difficult to know, namely, how poetic consciousness was formed in a polyglossic arena of cultural contact (*Indian Angles*, 60).

Gibson herself studies the paratexts and intertexts alongside the poems in a brilliantly integrated manner. She demonstrates a wide knowledge of classical Indian literature, and covers much of the material, cultural, and book history of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—who owned and sold books, where poetry was published, and so on—making her literary criticism widely appealing and relevant to many different types of scholar of the colonial period.

Chapter Five of *Indian Angles*, “From Christian Piety to Cosmopolitan Nationalisms: *The Dutt Family Album* and the Poems of Mary E. Leslie and Toru Dutt” was, for this reviewer, the most engaging, as it was here that links started to be formed with Banerjee’s *Becoming Imperial Citizens*. Gibson writes that the Bengali Christian Dutt family have been an ambivalent entity in literary criticism of the postcolonial era, their pro-British stance prompting some inevitable responses. As Gibson writes, quoting imagery from a poem analysed:

Dogmatic religious claims and the cultural and poetic displacements of writing poetry in a Christian tradition in India proved for Leslie and the elder Dutts a nearly insurmountable challenge. The flowers in the “sheaf” of the mission field, not the flowers of translation, are those whose glow has “dimmed” and whose “tender hues” have tarnished in the light of a latter day (*Indian Angles*, 225).

Yet, this postcolonial judgment of a family of poets with “bad” politics is precisely why, at this critical juncture, figures such as the Dutts are worthy of our attention.

This is what Banerjee writes, too, in *Becoming Imperial Citizens*, about Cornelia Sorabji (1866-1954). Like the Dutts, Sorabji, India’s first woman to study at Oxford as well as the country’s first female lawyer, had politics considered to be bad, from a post-Independence perspective. As Banerji writes,

Given that Sorabji devoted her life to nation-building in India but remained loyal to the British Empire, that she was a pioneer in women’s reform movements but was fiercely anti-suffragist, and that she was critical of the colonial state but also decried nationalist efforts, it is not surprising that she evades or confounds easy categorization—which may help explain her long absence from feminist, nationalist, and imperial histories. [...] In fact, it would perhaps not be too far from the truth to surmise that if Sorabji’s recalcitrance obscured her for so long, it is precisely that recalcitrance or “uncontainability” that accounts for her allure in recent scholarship (117–8).

It is interesting, then, that both Gibson’s and Banerjee’s works significantly engage with previously marginalised colonial-era figures, and suggests productive developments in colonial and postcolonial studies in the twenty-first century.

Becoming Imperial Citizens, unlike Gibson’s books, is not solely focused on literature and its modes of production and circulation, though Banerjee does use several literary texts to illustrate her points. It examines the ways Indians formulated notions of citizenship across the empire at a time when they were considered subjects rather than citizens. As she writes in the introduction, citizenship and voting rights in India were tied up with those of the working classes in Britain itself, where only sixty percent of

people could vote in the mid-nineteenth century. So, however unfair and degrading the denial of citizenship was for imperial Indians, the enfranchisement situation was similarly dire for many in the imperial centre.

Banerjee focuses on four figures across her four lengthy chapters. Chapter One, “Of the Indian Economy and the English Polls,” looks at Dadabhai Naoroji, a Parsi social and political leader who was a member of the British House of Commons in the 1890s, the first Asian to hold this position. This chapter focuses particularly on Naoroji’s 1901 *Poverty and Un-British Rule in India*, and the trope of the late Victorian gothic, discussed further below. Chapter Two, “South Africa, Indentured Labor, and the Question of Credit” focuses on M.K. Gandhi, specifically his time as a lawyer in South Africa, as well as other expatriate Indians in that country who were formulating ideas of imperial citizenship. Chapter Three, “The Professional Citizen in/and the Zenana” analyses Cornelia Sorabji, her 1934 work *India Calling*, and her role as a female lawyer to women secluded in purdah. Finally, Chapter Four, “Bureaucratic Modernity, the Indian Civil Service, and Grammars of Nationalism” looks at Surendranath Banerjee, a political leader who started as a member of the Indian Civil Service before being dismissed prematurely, largely for racially prejudiced reasons. Admittance to the IAS was considered, by many Indian subjects, a way into the governing spheres of their society. But, as Banerjee writes, “highly privileged as the concept of professionalism is, one is hesitant to underscore it as a mode of access to citizenship” (120). All four of the figures explored in *Becoming Imperial Citizens* were of importance to Indian nationalism in the late empire. They were professionally active and personally well-travelled across the empire, from India to London to South Africa to Canada. As case studies enable Banerjee to make transnational links between what was happening in India and in other parts of the empire that may have been different in their societal or cultural formations.

Particularly interesting were Banerjee’s meditations on the concept of the *fin de siècle* gothic. This is something familiar to most readers and scholars of nineteenth century literature, but Banerjee, very appropriately, links the very real fears that are evident in texts such as Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* to real politik. She writes:

If toward the end of the nineteenth century, the staple ingredients of earlier gothic narratives (such as haunted castles and torture chambers) were “supplanted by the threat of the decay and dissolution of one’s personality,” then Naoroji’s central premise that England’s economic and political practices in India at the time were symptomatic of a degenerating Englishness could hardly not tap into the prevalent metropolitan doubts of self-identity in relation to empire, the “imperial gothic” (40).

She goes on to point out that Naoroji drew links between this *fin de siècle* gothic, the Indian Mutiny of 1857, and Britain drawing blood from India (particularly through the figure of the vampire). This literary trope reappears briefly at the end of Chapter Two, when Banerjee draws links between this late nineteenth century gothic and the later twentieth century work of Mahasweta Devi, termed “bureaucratic gothic” (114). This later gothic is a challenge to the corrupt postcolonial state rather than the exploitative colonial one, but the connections between and continuities within the genre from different times and locations is fascinating. Though I would have liked to see this expanded on, it is, indeed, the topic of another study.

Becoming Imperial Citizens, while on a worthwhile topic, is a rather more challenging to read than Gibson's very accessible works. The prose style was dense, bordering on turgid at times. As a result of this sometimes impenetrable style, this reviewer feels *Becoming Imperial Citizens* may be of limited interest to readers not already firmly entrenched within the realm of study it falls into: namely, the history of imperial India. There are few attractions to draw in readers from outside these boundaries, and this is, ultimately, a shame, as surely this is a topic that could potentially interest scholars from several interdisciplinary fields. For instance, Banerjee herself is an Associate Professor of English, yet much of this work crosses over into history, and it belongs to a strand of scholarship on colonial and postcolonial topics, particularly related to India, that begin in English literary studies but comfortably cross disciplinary boundaries.

Indian Angles, *Anglophone Poetry* and *Becoming Imperial Citizens* are all worthwhile additions to scholarship on the long nineteenth century, colonial-era literature, Victorian studies, Indian studies, and a host of related fields. And though on slightly different topics, the three books do converge: Gibson explores the same overarching question as Banerjee from a different angle. Who had the privilege to write about India and Indian-ness in the colonial era, and, moreover, to be listened to in their own time and in subsequent eras, Gibson asks; Banerjee asks whether colonial subjects can hope to be listened to at all, whether in politics or poetry, knowing that *subjecthood* is not the same as *citizenship*.

Elen Turner

Elen Turner is a Western New York-based editor and writer. She has a PhD from the Australian National University, edits for Kathmandu-based *Himal Southasian* magazine, and specialises in South Asian literature, gender studies and culture. Her latest publications have been on sexual subalternity in contemporary Indian society, and Kathmandu street art movements.